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Ancient Wisdom

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THIS very title contains in it something of a paradox, comparing the ancient with the modern, and seeking to bring within the standpoint of the modern mind, so concerned with particulars, the comprehensive wisdom of the ancients, attained by radically different methods. The fundamental difference between the mentality of old and the modern mind lies in the fact that our approach to everything is objective in the almost literal signification of that word. Modern Science has grown out of the observations of matter and the world of matter, and we are being increasingly influenced in our thinking by Science, its technology and methods. Scientific thought is precise and logical; these are its distinguishing qualities. But the same qualities are to be found also in the thought of the ancients in their own fields, philosophy, logic, literature and crafts of various sorts. The difference is in the fact that we base our faith exclusively on the data of our physical observations and experience.

There were great minds in the past whose subtlety and brilliance still evoke our wonder, Plato for instance, but their thinking did not proceed altogether from objective data. It proceeded equally from certain truths or premises realized within themselves. The Greek maxim "Man know thyself" impelled them to know themselves first, and from that

first-hand knowledge, to proceed to a true comprehension of life and consciousness and the universe in general.

Modern Science had at first to make its way slowly; it had to accumulate and organize sufficient facts on which to base its theories. But now we possess a considerable body of knowledge with regard to the facts of the external world embracing many different departments. Our minds, while expanding along with the expansion of Science, have been drawn more and more to the facts and events that have crowded into our horizon. It is with this external world and the things in it—not only the world of science but also the human world which has been shaped by scientific technology—that we are mainly occupied. The whole tendency of the times is to keep the mind moving outwards. It is not only with regard to matters of Science that we are objective in the sense of being outward-turned, but that is the whole bent of our living.

What does this objectivity actually consist in when we examine the condition? We see that there is the object before us, whether a thing or a phenomenon, and it holds the attention; it draws us and the whole movement of our thought or consciousness towards itself. The objective mind is a mind that either reflects or moves towards the object which is perceived. This in itself is in the nature of things, but when there is a movement of the mind towards an objective caused by certain reactions such as the desire to enjoy or possess, these reactions constitute a subjective condition of which the mind that is involved in the movement is unaware. Thus it proceeds from one thing to another, unaware of the forces that cause the movement. The conditions that have come into existence as a result of science and technology have greatly intensified both this movement of the mind and its unawareness. Because of the speed and extent of our communications, the whole pace that is imposed on us by them, the thousand and one

attractions to which we are exposed, and the multiplication of our interests, there is abroad a mentality which is constantly moving outwards to this or that, with very little break in the continuity of that movement to collect itself and consider whither it is going or why. Thus we are caught in a whirl of activity, whether for business or pleasure, a round that is kept up largely by the momentum of a mechanical mind.

The objectivity of the mind is, on the one hand, reflected in the superb structure of scientific knowledge. By the observation of things as they are and as they take place with undeflected attention, both in Nature and in experiments of man's devising, seeking no explanation outside the phenomenon and its own proper field—although this field has latterly extended to cover the whole of space and time—man has been able to arrive at his knowledge of matter and the forces that operate in matter. Thus our objectivity has been of enormous value, because it has given us the truth or something of the truth with regard to the world around us.

But on the other hand, in the field of our daily living what we find is a condition of unawareness of the reactions and motives that determine our thinking and action. The tendency of the modern man is to act without questioning the end that starts up as a pre-fixed goal for which he has only to devise the means, his motivation being the satisfaction of his urge. He is occupied with the things he possesses or seeks to possess, with the sensations he enjoys or can enjoy, without considering how he himself is being affected by them. He has his vocation, of course, but it touches him only superficially, and then with the effect of narrowing his interests and thought.

Man's nature today is much as it used to be, except for some outstanding personalities; he has always been largely a product of his environment, because his nature is so mouldable, though the mould becomes after a time rigid and unalterable. But in the old days the environment was simple

and the influences that played were not so exciting or varied as at present. People lived a physically circumscribed life which did not press upon them very much, because life was not organized to the same degree as at present, nor was there the ceaseless pressure of propaganda. Today we have organizations of increasing magnitude for innumerable purposes and propaganda for the interests they represent. The organizations, though existing for co-operation and for streamlining activities for the ends to be attained, actually reduce the individual to a unit in the organization.

When life was simple there was plenty of time which could be used, not so much for amusements, because the amusements of those days amounted to nothing compared to what we have, but for friendly conversation, getting acquainted with neighbors, for an unhurried stroll and reflecting upon the beauties of Nature; it was a different kind of life altogether. The whole effect of such a restricted life, as we would call it, lived in consonance with Nature and her rhythms, was to throw man back upon himself, to induce him to make use of such resources as he possessed in himself. It developed concentration on a few worthwhile aims and, generally, a mood of philosophy, verging on stagnation in perhaps certain sections of the people.

Thus the achievements of those times were along quite other lines than what is prominent today. Our special interests lie in science and technology, divided and sub-divided in various ways. The interest then flowed along quite different channels—arts and crafts of various kinds, the truths of religion and philosophy, literature, religious worship, social contacts, and so forth. Of course we also have such interests, art, for instance; but few would contend that our art of today can stand comparison with the art of the past, whether in music, sculpture, painting or any other. Art today is a very special interest, in spite of all the galleries that are maintained.

There are people who think that modern art is wonderful in its own way, intrigued by its abstractions and ingenuity, but those who have not become votaries of mere technique would agree that our technology has advanced at the expense of certain aspects which need equally to be developed. We need not only science and technology, but also the arts and humanities; above all, a broader, calmer, more comprehensive and deeper approach to the fundamental problems of life.

It is this deeper and more comprehensive approach which characterized the best thought of the ancient times. Because the world did not press upon them so much and opportunities were limited, humanity as a whole, the masses of the people, did not have the sort of challenge that we have, and perhaps were not so active mentally as we are compelled to be. But on the other hand, the best minds, helped by the climate of the time, went much deeper into the problems of existence, into the significance of such life phenomena as birth, growth, death and sorrow, as well as the nature of the human mind and what it can discover by itself and in itself.

It may seem a surprising statement to the modern man that there is a whole universe inside himself, which perhaps exceeds in its wonderfulness, its vastness and splendour the physical universe with which we are acquainted to some extent. But may not such a universe exist, not only in the world of poetry, music and imagination, but also in inner experiences which are indescribable—a luminous vastness underlying or crowning the physical universe? This is a question which cannot be answered offhand; it has to be considered very deeply and intelligently, and there is no way of considering it except by exploring the possibilities of the human mind or consciousness. We cannot know whether there is a universe within ourselves of truth and beauty, of tremendous depths, unless we can sink the line of our thought

into those depths, unless we are able to enter into ourselves profoundly.

How can one enter into oneself? Do these words make any sense at all? It was the ancient view, and stands to reason, that one cannot gauge the human mind or consciousness and know its possibilities unless he develops the necessary degree of sensitivity, unless the consciousness becomes so calm and clear as to reveal its latent depths and capacities.

We have a mind which is sharp, agile and can manipulate things; it can master a variety of details and use them to construct machines, theories and various other things. But is there anything beyond this mind, either a nature or faculties which can be unfolded in freedom from the present limitations? When we closely examine it, we can see that the mind of each of us is made up in a certain specific way. It is made up of ideas it has absorbed, of certain established habits of thought and feeling; it has become set in a particular manner. If we can go behind this mind, so moulded by various factors and influences, if we can resolve the conditioning to which we have become subject, then we will come to consciousness pure and simple. In that consciousness we may perceive many things which are now completely shut off as by a veil, this veil being the moulding or the conditioning to which the mind has become subject.

I think in a certain way because of the ideas which are embedded in me, and I think mechanically according to habits formed in the past, reproducing the old thoughts over and over again like a gramophone needle going in its grooves. I have a settled standpoint which will not be disturbed, and if anybody tries to disturb it I become fearful, resentful, self-defensive and aggressive; I seek to put down the ideas which the other man presents to me. Thus we have developed a front with which we face the world, but it is a front which veils from us our own true inner nature.

It is only when the mind ceases from its movements, is not agitated by any thought, emotion or feeling, when there is no motive or hidden end working to determine the thinking, that in that clear state one can discover the true nature of oneself. A comparison which has been used is a mountain lake that is shut off from every disturbing wind. It is possible for man to come to that state of tranquillity or stillness in which he will see himself as he truly is, see reflected in the calm waters of his consciousness the depths or heights that exist in him.

This sounds poetical and beautiful, but each one can find out for himself whether he can attain this state, let alone what he may discover in it. To be in that state is in itself desirable. If we can come to this condition of freedom from every distraction and turmoil, no matter what happens from outside, what the impacts, then perhaps we will know whether there is something deeper than that state, whether there are degrees of depth and sensitivity in those clear waters. We cannot see those depths or the bed under the waters, whatever that bed might be, because there is so much mud on the surface, so many things that darken it, whirlpools which prevent our seeing anything clearly or deeply.

According to all the great Teachers, those who have spoken of this state, what is reflected in it is of a nature which is altogether different from the mind as we know it, vaster, fresher, more subtle and beautiful. It is a nature which belongs to the central point of our being, which stands aloft like a mountain-peak. We can only call it Spirit, a word often used with a vague connotation. Spirit, according to the old concepts, underlies all forms of being and all individual things, and the truth of it is infinitely more real to the consciousness that unites itself with it than anything which touches that consciousness from outside, modifies it partially or changes its natural condition. The word "reality" has obviously a

subjective meaning. If something does not feel real, if we do not experience it as a reality, then it is not real to us. On the other hand there can be a condition of consciousness arising from within which is real. So one can imagine that there can be a state of consciousness, an experience or comprehension, that expresses the fullness of oneself and therefore becomes a thousand times more real than anything that falls short of that fullness or has in it some kind of a void.

According to the ancient teaching, there is this primordial Principle, uncreate and universal, which is purely spiritual—a word the meaning of which has to be discovered—experienceable in the depths of the human consciousness, a Principle to which man and everything else that exists is equally related. But in man there is a capacity of consciousness through which he can realize the truth which is in that Spirit, or its true nature. That truth can manifest itself only in a consciousness that is prepared for it. It unfolds itself from within. Thus it follows that there is this possibility for man, an unfoldment from within, from that centre which exists in him as also in all others. This was perhaps the most important truth in the philosophy which we call the Ancient Wisdom.

It is ancient, not in the sense that it is antiquated; the implication rather is that it is a Wisdom which has come down from the most ancient times, being based upon an eternal Truth that is unaffected by time. Therefore it has as much validity and value now as it had ever before. It is not a Wisdom conceived by someone, but existing in Nature and awaiting discovery by each individual man. This Ancient Wisdom concerned itself with the nature of life, of man, of the universe as a whole, and how man is related inwardly to all things around him.

The distinction between the modern and the ancient approaches lies in this: we are concerned mainly with details,

particulars, and with these elements we seek to build an edifice in which the various parts will be in proper relation to one another. We take hold of the particulars and use them to construct something that is useful, meaningful or significant.

But in the old approach they were concerned more with the whole that is realizable in oneself and appraised the various elements that enter into the human consciousness in relation to that whole, the whole being more than the sum of the parts. Life is always a whole; it functions through a form which is a thing of parts. Every form of life, even the simplest, is an organization, and there are all kinds of processes taking place in the smallest cell as well as the extraordinarily complex human system; but all these are perfectly co-ordinated and life uses the form as a whole. Life means action and sensitivity, response to the subtlest impact in one manner or another. But life is different from the form, although based upon the form. Merely by examining the details of the organization and its processes we cannot know the nature of the indwelling life or the consciousness inherent in that life. We can examine the human body as much as we like, dissect it, study its organization, tissues and cells, but in doing so we let the individuality out; we cannot arrive at a knowledge of the individual, which is the soul, merely by studying the body and its functioning.

Surely, each of us regards himself as a whole and not as a thing of parts. Man uses a physical body and other organizations connected with the body, but he is a completeness in himself; he feels himself as one and the same amidst the flux of his experiences. This whole, which is the life indwelling in the form, and its nature, which is the nature of the consciousness in it, cannot be known by any observation from without. It can only be a matter of first-hand discovery by entering into ourselves and finding out what we are and how we are constituted.

In man's constitution there is matter, there is life, there is consciousness, and there is this something beyond the mind, the one universal Spirit, or the spiritual Principle. If man has in him these four categories and if they are all closely related to one another, making a whole, may it not be the case also with the whole universe? Perhaps in everything that exists there is matter, life, consciousness, and this subtle spiritual Principle, even though the consciousness involved in the so-called inanimate thing may not be capable of being active, because it has yet to unfold itself.

This idea that mind or consciousness underlies each and every thing that exists in the universe was one of the fundamental thoughts or truths of the ancient philosophy. It is not really so fantastic, even from our modern scientific standpoint. When we consider the nature of matter as we understand it now—composed of atoms, each of which is a system of electrical energies—and also the nature of life—functioning through an organization at every point of which there is electrical action—it does not seem a far-fetched idea that life may be present everywhere, that it is possibly present even in the most insignificant thing which we consider to be inanimate. If one can see the truth or plausibility of this idea, then matter and life are not separate and opposed categories, but life is involved in matter, and there is evolution wherever there is life.

Consciousness or mind is identical from the outset with life, because wherever there is life there is sensation and action, a kind of electronic intelligence at work. Life means the capacity to thrill and to act, interaction with the world outside the individual living form; it has also a capacity for initiating action from within. These characteristics are surely of the nature of consciousness. So when we consider the nature of life and consciousness, we come to the view that life is just a stream of conscious energy flowing through the

limitations of a material organization. This view has the authority of a modern scientific thinker, Henri Bergson, who regarded life as a non-material flow through the living form, and as he points out, consciousness is co-extensive with life.

If matter, life and consciousness, which seem to be separate categories, are in each individual form, intimately bound up with one another, then the universe is really a wholeness to a much greater extent inwardly and potentially than we might have imagined. To us it seems a universe of diverse categories, of numerous things not in harmony with one another; there is such a lot of chaos and conflict. But then may it not be that what we call evolution is not merely of the living species, but also and fundamentally the evolution of an order including each consciousness in it, that perhaps it is a process in which all things participate in some manner, to the end of a greater harmony? If we can even contemplate as a possible view such a universal process in which matter, life, consciousness, and that which lies beyond consciousness as we know it, are in one orderly and connected sequence, then it is a universe in which the objective and the subjective are not so completely apart, but in some way are related to each other through this extraordinary thing which is consciousness.

Through my mind, in which everything is registered, I perceive the differences of the external world. When I speak of Spirit or something spiritual, that also refers to something experienced in my consciousness. So consciousness is the one thing which belongs to me or is me, and the world of matter is reflected in it on the one side, and it realizes the nature of the Spirit on the other. This gives us at once a different idea about man.

What is man? What am I? I am just a state of consciousness which has a pivot or mooring, by which I know myself. It is a state which has been changing and is changing and is under various limitations at the present moment, these being

of body and mind. But when the body drops, the consciousness must continue to change and modify itself according to its contents and tendencies, retaining—this is part of the ancient teaching—a certain individuality. Consciousness is the central thing; it is through it and by means of the effects in it that we experience the different material conditions. It is this same consciousness, or rather, the principle of *Manas*, as it is called in Samskrit, from which arises imagination and thought, which experiences love, bliss and all kinds of extraordinary feelings which are indescribable. It is the truth of this consciousness, which seems to exist from the smallest to the greatest, which is the central truth for us to understand. And it is a truth which the great spiritual Teachers of the past tried to help people to understand more than anything else.

I may know myself superficially, but really to know myself, the potentialities in me, how my mind is made up, what it conceals, what is the true nature of myself behind the conditioning I have undergone, is quite another matter. All this is of profound interest and value, because it brings about a different attitude towards all things. Also it has in it the assurance of a complete change or transformation in ourselves.

If man is really a being compounded of consciousness affected in various ways, then surely he can change, because it is actually changing all the time. The mind is not in one state for very long, it is constantly changing its direction and ideas. If it can change automatically, can it not be changed by understanding and a wise control? If, starting from the condition of an infant, it can become a child, a youth, an old man, can it not regain even in the waking state, the innocence, freshness, sensitivity and vitality which it has lost, these being apparently inherent in the original, natural, pure consciousness? It may be that we can regain our original condition, and this possibility makes sense, becomes plausible and understandable, if we think of man not as a limited, made-up entity imprisoned in a

physical body with various thoughts and experiences stored up in him making a hardened mentality, but as an individual whose real being is quite outside what he has become.

If there is under the changing surface the clear pure water of life, of a pure consciousness, it can be caused to overflow and there is the possibility for each man of a complete regeneration, which means only the regaining of his original state, freedom from the limitations he has undergone. The life in him is always fresh and vital; it is only the body, the organization, and that part of the consciousness which is moulded by the organization, which deteriorates, grows old and stale.

One can see that this view of life shows Nature as uniform throughout and absolutely logical and complete in her arrangements; it shows that everything is progressing towards an order in which whatever is deepest, most spiritual in every individual and thing, which is an aspect of the one Spirit, will be revealed and finally prevail. This, stated broadly, is the Ancient Wisdom. It is called Wisdom because of its ethical implications, not only because it is an intelligent philosophy. If life is of the nature of a progression from the one centre, all of us are sharers in that movement; we are all bound to one another in the bonds of an inescapable brotherhood. Man is not just the mental entity he considers himself to be; he is essentially a spiritual being and has potentialities in that being waiting to be released. There is in him a fountain yet to be opened, and when it is, there will rush forth the waters of life and immortality, possessing a quality different from what is experienced in one's ordinary way of living.

Although this philosophy seems to start from a subjective conception or truth, it is not opposed to the facts of modern Science or any other facts, howsoever derived. Science starts from below, the ground level of the physical world;

it observes facts and builds up an edifice into which all these facts are fitted. But in this other approach one starts from a certain truth which is within oneself, and that is the truth of the life that he is. From there one proceeds to establish everything else in its proper place. The approaches are different, but surely the one must exactly harmonize and fit in with the other. An understanding of the whole can never be contrary to a knowledge of the parts.

Because we have now an enlarged view of the material universe, there must be a corresponding understanding from the side of life which will match this view. The larger the expanse we can survey, the greater should be our insight, the depth into which we are able to enter to balance the enlarged understanding. The mere knowledge of the material world must necessarily be superficial because it touches only the surface of the mind, it does not touch us vitally, it cannot become a profound experience. Einstein has said somewhere that what he studied was to him a matter of profound experience. The profundity came not from the mind which worked out the equations, but from the depths of his own heart, the way he responded to the facts, theories or laws which he was contemplating.

There is in man a consciousness which goes beyond the mind that deals with differences. It is much more related to what we call the heart, his capacity for deep emotional experiences and to the wholeness of his being. The mind is an instrument which man uses to devise innumerable other instruments, but an instrument is different from the being. The mind sees only the appearance, but the appearance has always a meaning. Everything in life, whether human being, tree or flower and every phenomenon has a significance, a beauty which we pass by, because we do not pay sufficient attention to it. We live in an ocean of beauty, unaware of the significance that belongs to life in all its aspects, we miss it

because we are concerned only with the details, the superficialities.

Life has to become for us a matter of discovery, of learning for oneself rather than learning from others. It is this capacity for discovery which most of us have lost. We have taken things second-hand, because there is not a fresh mind with a deep and original approach. Ours is a mind which has settled into so many grooves of thought. So each of us has to change himself, that is, his nature, which is really an acquired nature, before life can become what it can be with all its possibilities and the riches around us.

The statement that man is fundamentally spiritual, in the sense that his destiny is to merge himself in the Spirit, raises the question: What do Spirit and spiritual mean? That is something that cannot be conveyed in words. When we say "Spirit," we are referring to something unconditioned, therefore eternally fresh and free. Being unconditioned, it must have a transcendent nature which can only be realized in the wholeness of ourselves, in a consciousness which has been purged of every impurity, every impediment, and being free from all complications, has come to that state of a little child to which the Christ referred when He said: "Except ye become as little children, ye can in no wise enter the kingdom of heaven."